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ABSTRACT

Increased national attention to the quality of education has resulted in a more critical examination of the community college transfer function. This concern for transfer has been precipitated by several factors: (1) the declining percentage of community college students who transfer; (2) the growth of the community services, vocational, and remedial curricula; (3) a perceived decline in the academic performance of community college transfer students at four-year institutions; and (4) research indicating that students starting their collegiate careers at two-year colleges have a smaller chance of attaining a baccalaureate than do freshmen at residential, four-year insitutions. There are, however, several barriers to an accurate assessment of the transfer function, including the lack of norms relating to the transfer function, flawed counting procedures, lack of accurate data on the number of students transferring, and difficulty in interpreting data on the upper-division performance of community college students who do transfer. Community colleges are responding to these growing concerns with a renewed emphasis on mandatory basic skills assessment and counseling. In a recent study, over 60% of the colleges surveyed required academic advising for all students, for students taking more than a certain number of units, or for all new students. In addition, most of the colleges utilized placement or assessment testing as a means of directing students into classes for which they were academically prepared. The current reexamination of transfer education has resulted in the increased acceptance of an enhanced community college role in serving academically talented students and in greater recognition of the need for assessment and tracking programs that identify transfer students and assist them toward their degree goals. (EJV)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE FOR JUNIOR COLLEGES

ERIC DIGEST

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THE STATUS OF THE TRANSFER FUNCTION

Introduction

Increased national attention on the quality of education has resulted in a more critical examination of the community college transfer function. This concern has emerged not only in the professional literature but in the popular literature as well. *Time* magazine (19 September 1983), for example, reports the 20-year decline in the percentage of community college students who plan to transfer and notes that "educators and public officials are now trying to work out ways to get community colleges back to their basics" (p. 60). After years of growth, during which colleges championed a comprehensive curriculum, the original, transfer function of the colleges has reemerged as a primary determinant of community college quality.

What has caused the growing concern for transfer education?

As early as 1979, Lombardi noted a resurgence of interest in and concern for the transfer function. Since then, researchers, legislators, and the media have raised serious questions about the viability of community college transfer education. Several factors have precipitated this concern:

- --the declining percentage of community college students who transfer (Farland and Cruz, 1982; "Back to First Principles," 1983);
- --the growth of the community services, vocational, and remedial curricula (Kissler, 1982; Knoell, 1982; Lombardi, 1979);
- --a perceived decline in the academic performance of community college transfer students at four-year institutions (Kissler, 1980, 1982; Kissler and others, 1981);
- --research indicating that after controlling for social background, ability, motivation and other personal factors, students starting their collegiate career at a two-year college have a smaller chance of attaining a baccalaureate degree than do freshman at residential, four-year institutions (Astin, 1977).

Can the transfer function be assessed?

Do community colleges provide quality transfer education? How many community college students intend to transfer? How many of the students do transfer? How well do these students perform at four-year institutions? These questions are central to an assessment of the community college transfer function; yet they are not easily answered.

There are several barriers to an accurate assessment. One of the most formidable is the lack of norms relating to the transfer function. Because the priority given to transfer education varies from state to state, there are marked regional differences in the number and percentage of community college students who transfer (*The Role of the Community Colleges...*, 1983). Consequently, there is no consensus regarding the optimal or acceptable percentage of community college students who should transfer. Lombardi (1979) notes that both college practitioners and critics are "silent on this issue" (p.8).

Flawed counting procedures also add to the problem. Figures on the number of students who enter community colleges with the intention of transferring are inflated by colleges that count as transfer students anyone enrolled in a credit course but not enrolled in a vocational program. Under this counting system, students taking credit courses for avocational purposes are tagged as potential transfers. The inflation of these figures is increased by the practice of asking first-time, full-time freshmen if they intend to transfer. Because few are willing to totally rule out the possibility of further education, "few will say that they never intend to transfer to a senior institution" (Cohen and Brawer, 1982, p. 53).

Yet another problem is the fact that accurate data on the number of students who do transfer are not available (Cohen, 1979). Most data collection systems are set up to accommodate information about linear transfers, those students who spend a year or two at the community college and then enroll at a university. Many systems, however, do not take into account those students who start their work at a four-year institution, transfer to a community college, and then return to a university. Other students who are usually ignored in the counting process include those who stop-out for a term between community college and university attendance and those who transfer from a community college to an out-of-state institution.

Finally, data on the upper-division performance of community college students who do transfer are difficult to interpret. Though there are numerous follow-up studies examining the performance of transfer students at four-year institutions, the studies are dissimilar and provide results which are not comparable. "They may concentrate on first-time transfers, transfers attending senior institutions at a given term, transfers who completed a minimum number of units or terms, or transfers to the state public institutions" (Lombardi, 1979, p. 9).

How are community colleges responding to these concerns about the transfer function?

Community colleges are responding to growing concerns about the transfer function with a renewed emphasis on mandatory basic skills assessment and counseling. In a survey of 34 colleges in six large, urban community college districts, researchers found that over 60 percent of the

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colleges required academic advising for all students, for students taking more than a certain number of units, or for all new students. In addition, most of the colleges utilize placement or assessment testing as a means of directing students into classes for which they are academically prepared (*Counseling Services to Facilitate Transfer*, 1982). The *laissez faire* notion of the student's right to fail is being abandoned. As Leslie Koltai, chancellor of the Los Angeles Community College District, puts it:

> In terms of transfer education...our leadership role will involve letting it be known that certain standards will have to be met by students and faculty, that reading and writing assignments are to be an integral part of all transfer level courses, that developmental assistance is available for those who need it, and that a rigorous approach to student advisement is not only desirable--it is expected. (Koltai, p.5)

Related to this emphasis on standards and counseling is the growing number of community college honors programs. These programs serve not only to attract academically capable students to the two-year college, but to "direct and motivate students toward successful transfer" (*Transfer, Honors, and Excellence*, 1982, p. 1). Often, the honors programs serve an additional purpose: to improve the overall quality of the academic program. The "Emphasis on Excellence" program at Miami-Dade Community College, for example, serves in part to "address the continuing need for high quality programs during the first two years of college" (*Emphasis on Excellence*, 1980, p. 1).

Conclusion and Bibliography

There can be no doubt that community colleges continue to help millions of students who have no other access to higher education. Unfortunately, the fact that many of these students do achieve the baccalaureate is sometimes overlooked. However, the current push to provide quality education as well as equitable access has resulted in a number of efforts to improve the transfer function. These efforts are not uncontroversial. Not all educators would agree that it is the college's responsibility to identify and track students (*Identifying and Assisting . . .*, 1982). Others might claim that honors programs are elitist. Still others, pointing to the growth in the absolute number of community college transfer students, maintain that two-year college transfer programs are being unfairly criticized. Nonetheless, the current reexamination of transfer education has resulted in increased acceptance of an enhanced community college role in serving academically talented students and in a greater acceptance of the need for assessment and tracking programs that identify transfer students and assist them toward their degree goals.

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